

History versus Hearsay

Much has been said and written about the *Titanic's* sinking, even as the ship was going down. In some instances, there are *Titanic* accounts from the 1912 period which must be examined closely in light of conflicting historical evidence.

Early newspaper articles reported that all of *Titanic's* passengers were safe. These were based on a confusing array of overlapping, sometimes speculative, wireless messages from multiple ships. One erroneous report claimed that the *Titanic* was being towed to Halifax and that all of her passengers were safely transferred to the *Parisian* or *Virginian*.



April 15, 1912 edition of *The Evening Standard*, reporting that *Titanic* passengers were rescued. Library of Congress.

Titanic survivors themselves told differing accounts of that night, including the music being played as the ship sank, what time the lights went out, and whether or not the ship broke in half. Many experts and senior *Titanic* crewmembers did not believe *Titanic* had broken in two. It was not until 1985, when Dr. Robert Ballard discovered the separated parts of the hull, that this was accepted as fact.



Painting of the *Titanic* wreckage, showing the ship had broken in half. "The Broken Dream," by Ken Marschall.

One passenger on board the *Carpathia* even claimed to have seen *Titanic* sink with her own eyes - despite the fact that the rescue ship did not arrive until hours after the sinking. Stories continued in the weeks and months that followed the catastrophe, as *Titanic* survivors were interviewed by newspapers and *Titanic* victims' bodies were recovered from the sea. Some controversial tales continue even today.

Survivor Philip Mock told the *Worcester Telegram* that he had seen two of the most famous *Titanic* passengers—John Jacob Astor and William Stead—clinging to a raft in the open ocean. However, most other accounts put the two men on the ship as it sank. While Stead’s body was never recovered, Col. Astor’s body was retrieved by the recovery ship *Mackay-Bennett*.



John Jacob Astor IV

Subsequently, Gerald Ross, an electrician on the *Mackay-Bennett*, was quoted describing Astor’s pocket watch as, “... a costly thing, studded with diamonds, was dangling from his pocket.”¹

However, when Col. Astor’s effects were

¹ Quoted in the *Newark Star* and *New York Herald* May 2, 1912, found in *Voices from the Carpathia: Rescuing RMS Titanic*, George Behe, pg 271.

inventoried by the Coroner's staff, the listing notes: "Gold watch, cuff links gold and diamond, diamond ring with three stones, £225 in English notes, \$2440 in notes, £5 in gold, 7s. in silver; 5 ten franc pieces, and gold pencil; and pocket book."²

Thus, while the Astor ring and cuff links do have specifically listed diamonds, the actual pocket watch does not. Therefore, it is clear in this instance of historic conflict that Gerald Ross's comment was incorrect - Astor's pocket watch was not described by officials as "studded with diamonds." Subsequently, the "gold watch" (engraved with Astor's initials "JJA") was passed by the Halifax Coroner's office, along with Astor's body and his other effects, to Nicholas Biddle, the executor of the Astor estate.³



Astor pocket watch (Mittel Museum)

² Public Archives of Nova Scotia

³ Letter of transmittal setting forth inventory of documentation from Public Archives of Nova Scotia – March 6, 1998

John J. Astor's gold watch was then passed by Biddle to Astor's heir, his son Vincent. Vincent carried the watch for over twenty years until, in June 1935, Vincent gifted the watch to his godson, William Dobbyn V - the son of both John and Vincent Astors' long-time private secretary, William Dobbyn IV. It was from William V's estate that the current owner, the Miottel Museum of Berkeley, California, acquired the Astor watch.⁴ Thus, the provenance that clearly documents the journey of Col. John J. Astor's watch to the present also proves that Ross's 1912 observation must have been mistaken.

In the same way that today's current events can often be confused or misinterpreted, facts regarding historical stories are also sometimes in conflict. It is important to remember that, in order to tell the most accurate story, eyewitness accounts, historical documents, contemporary research, and the artifacts themselves must all be carefully examined and assessed.

⁴ Certified statement: Elizabeth A.M. Dobbyn, April 1, 1997



Life jacket of Madeline Astor (Titanic Historical Society Inc. / Ed & Karen Kamuda Collection) and pocket watch of John Jacob Astor IV (Mittel Museum) on display at the Reagan Library.

John J. Astor's gold watch and Mrs. Madeleine Astor's lifejacket are currently on exhibit together at the "TITANIC at the Reagan Library" exhibition. It is likely that these two rare, historic and related pieces have not been together since the tragic morning of April 15th, 1912.